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For Top Level U.S. Officials, Iran Sessions Start the Day

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A light-gray looseleaf notebook sits on the right side of Zbigniew Brzezinski's desk atop a pile of other notebooks and folders. On the bottom of the pile is a book entitled "Iran."

Every day for the past six weeks, except for a few Sundays, the notebook of President Carter's national security adviser has grown thicker by three single-spaced pages.

A white tab marks the date of each three-page addition. There is room for many more entries.

A tan card clipped to the cover labels the notebook "Minutes of NSC/SCC (Iran) Meetings." It represents what top officials consider to be the best-organized, most centralized management of any crisis yet to face the Carter administration.

The Special Coordinating Committee of the National Security Council meets at 9 o'clock most mornings to pull together the government's efforts to obtain the release of 50 Americans held in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and three others stuck in the Iranian foreign ministry.

This is the group that reviews efforts thus far, considers the latest reports from Iran, and discusses U.S. reactions and initiatives in hopes of resolving the crisis.

The use of regular SCC meetings has meant that the administration's management of the hostage problem has been, in the opinion of senior officials, better coordinated than any previous security or foreign policy problems since Carter took office almost three years ago.

There is less confusion and bureaucratic conflict in the handling of it than of some earlier problems.

Shortly before 9 every morning, the chauffeured black limousines of top officials begin driving through the heavy metal gate from the Ellipse into West Executive Avenue, the block-long parking lot between the West Wing of the White House and the Old Executive Office Building.

The passengers get out by the basement door to the West Wing. Some carry folders of papers, the results of their own staff meetings in departments and agencies around the city, meetings that began before most Washington residents have started work.

The officials hurry inside past guards, turn right, go down a few steps and enter a windowless, wood-paneled Situation Room. Usually a few minutes after the digital clock on the wall has said 9, Brzezinski sits down at one end of the rectangular table and opens the meeting.

Vice President Walter Mondale sits on his right, Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance on his left, and CIA Director Stansfield Turner faces him at the opposite end of the table.

Down the table from Mondale on his side are Defense Secretary Harold Brown and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff David Jones. By Vance are Attorney General Benjamin R. Civiletti, Treasury Secretary G. William Miller and Energy Secretary Charles Duncan.

A shifting cast of White House officials may be present: Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan, domestic adviser Stuart Eizenstat, counsel Lloyd Cutler, special adviser Hedley Donovan and Press Secretary Jody Powell.

The first part of the meeting deals with financial aspects of the crisis, including U.S. banking restrictions on Iran, economic matters, including oil, and legal matters including Iranian students' status here. Then Miller, Duncan and Civiletti leave, and some of the White House people might also depart.

The second part deals with political and military aspects of the crisis.

The officials discuss the latest developments in contacts with Iranian authorities through friendly countries, moves in the United Nations, efforts to obtain support from allies and neutral nations for diplomatic and economic moves, and the changing military dispositions ordered because of the crisis.

The discussion is easy and informal among men who have been working together closely on a number of problems for almost three years. But no problem has demanded the prolonged intensive concentration of this one.

Between the time this administration began and the beginning of the crisis, the SCC had met 40 or 50 times a year. On an average of once a week, it has considered options in arms control negotiations, the Soviet and Cuban build-up in Ethiopia, the Soviet brigade in Cuba, and other problems in the field of foreign policy and national security.

In the six weeks since the embassy in Tehran was taken over, the committee has met about 40 times.

The meetings usually last 60-90 minutes. Then a secretary from Brzezinski's office types up the three pages of minutes. They end with recommendations.

Sometimes Brzezinski goes directly from the meeting to the Oval Office and gives Carter an oral report on the discussions. Sometimes he sends Carter the minutes and talks them over with him later.

On a few occasions, when major recommendations have been involved, the SCC members have gone upstairs to discuss their thinking with Carter. When the president takes charge of the meeting, it turns into a National Security Council session.

After the officials have gone back to their cars and driven out the north end of West Executive Avenue into Pennsylvania Avenue, phone calls are made.

Hodding Carter, the State Department spokesman who has been the most visible exponent of administration policy in this crisis, coordinates with Powell what will be said at the noon briefing. Carter also talks to Vance after the secretary drives into the basement of the State Department and takes a private elevator to his seventh-floor office facing the Lincoln Memorial.

Powell also talks sometimes to Thomas Ross, the Defense Department spokesman, and to Joe Laitin, who speaks for the Treasury, and others.

The administration has taken unusual care to try to avoid discordant or contradictory official statements because of the danger of affecting the hostages' safety.